

Text: Luke 20.24  
St Stephen's

7/4, 2010  
Sun AM

## The Politics of Jesus

Today we celebrate another **birthday of America, our 234<sup>th</sup>**. I have never been more **proud** to be an American. I am not alone. But at the same time I have never been more **concerned**. The nations of the West are in serious decline, and many of us wonder if America's time has passed.

At Gettysburg, President Lincoln said that we are "*testing whether this nation can long endure.*" We are **still testing**. Earlier in this decade, Michael Novak put the question like this: "*Is America a meteor that blazed across the heavens and is now exhausted? Or rather is our present moral fog a transient time of trial, those hours cold and dark before the ramparts' new gleaming? Are we near our end or at a [new] beginning?*"

I think it very much depends on how we answer **a critical question** facing our nation, and that is the **question of God and governance**, of the relationship between public life and personal faith, the relationship between church and state, between God and country.

Today many believe that private faith and civic discourse are not to be confused or mingled, that a **wall of separation** must stand between Church and State, between God and country.

2000 years ago, **Israel faced the question of God and governance**. In the time of Jesus, Israel was an occupied territory of Rome, and in Rome, Caesar was increasingly worshipped as Lord. But Israel was quite clear that the God of heaven and earth was the Lord, and that there were to be no lords above him or beside him. So Israel faced the question of God and governance, and developed several different responses:

- There were **political realists**, and they viewed cooperation with Rome as the unavoidable price for survival. "Compromise" was their cry.
- There were **political revolutionaries**. They viewed cooperation with Rome as high treason and a fatal compromise to faith in a holy God. They were ready to throw the Romans out and launch a government purified of Roman idolatry.
- And then there were **political dropouts**. These were groups that withdrew from the questions of politics and governance altogether. They set up communities out in the desert to live pure lives and wait for the messiah.

This was the situation when religious leaders put a question to Jesus.

*They came and said to him, "Teacher... is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?"*

Mark 12:14

This question referred to a **special tax**, the '**head tax**' Rome imposed on all its subjects. The tax was offensive to Jews, not because of its amount but because of its **source**. It was an annual reminder of Jewish subservience to Roman idolatry. Some 25 years earlier when it had been put in place, it **launched an insurrection**; a man named '**Judas the Galilean**' called all Jews to refuse to pay that tax and led an armed revolt against Rome. With his followers, he **cleansed the temple** of Romans and said 'Let God be our king, not Caesar'. Roman soldiers caught and executed him. That was how this tax got started.

25 years later, Jesus begins his ministry. For 3 years the agenda of Jesus has been the **Kingdom of God**. In Israel that subject raised everyone's passion, everyone's hopes. And now he has come **to Jerusalem**. The first thing he did was to go to the Temple and run out the money changers with a whip. You can sense the buzz running through the city. In the temple courts, he is approached by his enemies who want to smoke him out. They basically ask him, '*What do you think of the head tax?*' They get right up in his face – **should we pay this tax or not?** Give us a '**yes**' or '**no**' answer.

I want to notice something here: **Jesus refuses to give them a 'yes' or 'no' answer** on this issue. It's not that Jesus couldn't ever give a 'yes' or 'no' answer. He could be quite clear and often seemed to be **too clear** for comfort. Especially when he talked about repenting from sin and believing in him and obeying him and following him.

But when he is dragged **into the arena of politics**, we more often find him giving a nuanced answer – or a surprising answer that moves beyond the questions being asked. Just note that with me, and think about it. **Jesus refuses political simplicity**. He seemed unwilling to sell his soul to the people who had the **perfect political platform – and a lot of people did**. And he seemed surprisingly willing to deal with people on all sides of the current burning political questions. Just think about that.

*Jesus said... "Show me a coin." They brought the coin...*

Luke 20.24

I want you to note that **he didn't have any coins on him**. He had to ask for one. Just note it; I'll come back to that in a few minutes.

*he asked them, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?"*

*"Caesar's," they replied.* Luke 20.24

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The coin was **the denarius**, a silver coin worth a day's wages for a common workman, minted by Rome. It wasn't actually very much. But it stood for something much more. The image on the coin was that of that of Tiberius Caesar. The inscription on it was *'Tiberius Caesar, son of the God Augustus, Pontifus Maximus, High Priest'*

Right there you can see why the coin and the tax was so offensive to Jews. It was **the claim of Caesar to divine sonship**, to be not just the political leader of the Roman world, but its high priest. Caesar's claim was nothing new in the ancient world. Almost **every government** known to humankind up until this time said that it had divine authority, divine approval, divine guidance, divine presence – and Caesar would shortly go on to **claim that divinity for himself**.

There could be **no question** about giving over to these claims for Jews. But how could you even live in such a government, under such a government, within such an economy? It was **the question of God and governance**. **Jesus' answer** stunned and silenced them all...

*Then Jesus said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." ...marveling at his answer they were silent.*

Luke 20.24-26

He doesn't commend:

- compromising acceptance of the system (Herodians)
- violent revolt against the system (Revolutionaries) or
- dropping out of the system (Essenes)

Instead Jesus frames what has been called **a dual citizenship**. We are citizens of his kingdom and citizens of our own country. We have obligations to our God and obligations to our nation. We must **honor them both and order them both**. To my knowledge this is the very first articulation of **limited government** in the world. The rights of human rulers are honored, but limited. The responsibilities of citizens are affirmed, but ordered. **This is the politics of Jesus**.

Our founders affirmed this dual citizenship:

**George Washington, "Farewell Address"**

*"Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports."*

**President John Adams, (first VP & second Pres) 1798:** *"Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other."*

**President Thomas Jefferson, 1781** (inscribed on the wall of the Jefferson Memorial): *"Can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are the gift of God?"*

**Justice William O. Douglas, 1952:** *"We are a religious people whose institutions presuppose a Supreme Being"*

The signs of this trust in God and his written word are part and parcel of our national life and history... An **image of Moses** faces the speaker of the House of Representatives; our **coins** proclaim, "In God We Trust"; our **Pledge of Allegiance** says we are "One Nation, Under God", our **Declaration of Independence** declares that we are "endowed by the Creator with certain unalienable rights", our presidents take their **oath of office** with the phrase, "So help me God"... and the list of these kind of affirmations is long.

Take away civic faith in God as our Creator, and we are left to ourselves. Take away our accountability to him as Judge, and we will insist we are accountable to no-one. Take away our dependence upon his guidance, and we are left to our own wisdom. And then our freedoms will turn on us and degrade us and kill us.

In order that the nations of the world might not degrade and crush the people of the world, **Jesus speaks two words**. It is important to hear them both, to follow them both.

## 1) Give To Your Country

*"Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's"* Luke 20.25

With these words, Jesus clearly meant **pay your taxes**. But the principle is larger. He also meant **honor** your leaders, **pray** for them,

**get involved** in your government, **vote** your values and your faith, help with in the great moral issues of our day, carry your share of the load, and leave this country better for your presence...

Jesus sees no such thing as a Christian who has checked out of politics. What is needed is Christian doctors, nurses, lawyers, politicians, voters, parents, school board members, teachers, administrators, businessmen, workers, citizens, soldiers... people who will be salt and light, take the values of God and Gospel of God and get involved! Give to America, give to Pittsburgh, give to the boroughs of the Quaker Valley region.

*Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's!*

That is his first word. But his second word has priority. His second is the place we must go first.

## 2) Give to your God

*"Give to God the things that are God's."* Luke 20.25

When Jesus held up that coin, he asked whose **image** was on it. Well, Caesar's was on it. And Jesus made the commonsense point... The presence of Caesar's image was a **mark of ownership**; everything with Caesar's image on it goes back to Caesar.

The unspoken point is even more important: Whose 'image' is upon you, in you? Everything with God's image on it goes back to God. You **can't take something made in God's image and give it to something else**. Not to Caesar, not to the ancient idols. You were made for God, not for anything less. Not for any government, not for any ideology, not for any of the '**ism's**' that rule our current culture: consumerism, or materialism or any of the modern idols. You were made for the living God. He is **our highest allegiance** above every other allegiance. Our devotion to our country stops when our country bids us to worship something less than God, to enter a way of life that dishonors God, or tells us to disobey God.

In a moment of testing when they were ordered by government authorities to cease speaking about Jesus, the Apostles responded: *'We must obey God rather than men'*.

*"Give to God the things that are God's."*

Through the history of the world, every system of governance has been about the pursuit of **power and success and recognition and resources** – or some variant of these. Most political movements are about the **control** of these things – too often political movements are simply **rearrange** the list of who has these things.

For centuries, political leaders have known that if you want to **stop a revolution**, all you have to do is take away their power and success and recognition and resources. Just take it away. And if they are still causing trouble, kill them. That will stop them.

And then **Jesus came to Jerusalem**. Preaching a kingdom - that wasn't about power and success and recognition and resources.

He is 'the King without a coin' (Tim Keller)

Without recognition

Without success

Without power

When they stripped him of all these things, instead of killing his revolution, it just launched it.

When they **took these things from him**, he just suffered it. For your sake. For the sake of all the people of the world – so that he could **bring a new kind of power and success and recognition and resource** – a new kind of Kingdom – one that will outlast the world - into every political system of the world.

In so doing **Jesus has raised his cross** over the nations of the world, the governments of the world, the politics of the world. By its light you can see what is true and what is not.

**Those who live close to the cross of Jesus** are able to bring a whole new kind of politics to the nations of this world.

For the sake of America, may their number increase.

For the sake of the nations of the world, may their numbers increase.